



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany

Citation for published version:

Ahonen, P 2010, 'Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany', *Central European History*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 705-706.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938910000920>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S0008938910000920](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938910000920)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Central European History

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Ahonen, P. (2010). Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany. *Central european history*, 43(4), 705-706doi: 10.1017/S0008938910000920

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Anglo-French appeasement in the 1930s, and the post-World War II Nuremberg and other war crimes trials. Also needed is a more in-depth and balanced analysis of the Versailles treaty and an explanation of why Nazi V-weapons had such little success in 1944 and early 1945. The book is aimed at college students and a general audience.

DONALD M. MCKALE
CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

doi:10.1017/S0008938910000919

Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany. Edited by Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann. New York and Oxford: Berghahn. 2008. Pp. x + 329. Cloth \$85.00. ISBN 978-1-84545-397-8.

This interesting and important edited volume, which emerged from a conference held at the University of Virginia in 2003, sets out to explore how Germans dealt with death and the dead in the twentieth century, a period largely defined by the mass death and destruction associated with the two world wars. Given Germany's centrality to both conflicts, the study of violence and death in twentieth-century Germany is not exactly uncharted terrain in the historical literature. But, as the three editors point out in their lucid and perceptive introduction, although we know a good deal about certain issues, such as "the death cults and killing fields of Nazi-occupied Europe" (p. 5) or the experiences of World War I soldiers, many other important questions remain largely unexplored. These include, in particular, the links between "long-term patterns of mourning, burial, and grief" and "the short-term cataclysmic violence of the two world wars," i.e., the connections between mass death on the one hand and modern Germany's broader, related social and cultural practices on the other (p. 13). The volume approaches this far-ranging field from multiple perspectives, aiming to provide new impulses for the study of the social and cultural history of death in modern Germany and beyond.

The book consists of fourteen chapters, divided into four sections. As the editors explain in their introduction, the first two sections, labeled "bodies" and "disposals," address the "materiality" that the deceased leave behind, particularly the dead bodies themselves. The last two sections, entitled "subjectivity" and "ruins," in turn, analyze the ways in which the living have interacted with the dead, particularly by using their imaginations in an attempt to make sense of an event that no earthly commentator has actually experienced.

Much of the volume works commendably well. All the chapters are insightful, original contributions that enhance our understanding of mass death and its broader

social and cultural context in modern Germany. As with any edited volume, certain essays stand out. Particularly valuable, not least in view of the book's stated goals, are the contributions that adopt a broad, comparative approach, transcending particular time periods and/or politico-geographical boundaries. These include Paul Betts's chapter on the state funerals of Konrad Adenauer and Walter Ulbricht, which perceptively compares and contrasts the two burial ceremonies as a means of exploring East and West German political cultures. Another standout is Simon Ameskamp's contribution on the history of cremation in Germany, which highlights long-term continuities and gradual changes in German popular attitudes toward particular burial practices, suggesting that the two World Wars, despite all their mass carnage, made relatively little difference in this regard.

Several of the more specifically focused chapters are very impressive as well. Kay Schiller's essay "Death at the Munich Olympics" is an engaging and well-researched exploration of West German reactions to the infamous Palestinian terrorist attack against Israeli athletes at the summer Olympic games of 1972 within the context of longer-term German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Monica A. Black's contribution on burial practices in Berlin immediately after World War II insightfully highlights breaks and continuities in popular beliefs and attitudes across the so-called "zero hour." Peter Fritzsche's examination of the relationship between private grief and collective death through the lens of a particular Berlin cemetery and two recent German novels is also characteristically stimulating.

Although the volume does not have any glaring weaknesses, one question that can be raised about most edited collections does apply here as well: just where to strike the balance between coherence and diversity among the featured contributions? Arguably, some of the chapters do not address the themes identified in the introduction particularly closely. Michael Geyer, for example, devotes most of his essay to a discussion of changes in German battlefield tactics in World War I and their longer-term implications, delivering interesting insights into military history but not necessarily into the broader cultural context of death and mourning. Similarly, Daniel Steuer's essay on the writings of W. G. Sebald is probably more convincing as a literary analysis than as a reflection on the broad themes underlying this collection. Ultimately, however, these are minor quibbles with what remains a fine, far-ranging, and important book. I hope it will find a wide readership and help to stimulate further research in related fields, despite the rather exorbitant retail price that the publishers have assigned to it, at least in the hardback edition.

PERTTI AHONEN

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

doi:10.1017/S0008938910000920